An Assessment of the Functioning of the Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline of the District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency

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I. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW

The District of Columbia's Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) is responsible for providing a range of supports and services to children and families who are at risk of or have experienced abuse and neglect. *One of the most important child protective service functions of any public child welfare agency is to receive and to promptly and appropriately respond to all reports of suspected child abuse or neglect.* Since 2001, this function (which was formerly divided between the Metropolitan Police Department and the District's Child and Family Services Agency) has been the responsibility of CFSA, which has created and operates a 24-hour Hotline to receive and respond to reports of alleged child abuse and neglect. The Hotline takes all calls from the public 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Calls are accepted through its publicized Hotline telephone number – 202-671-SAFE (7233).

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) is appointed by the U.S. District Court to monitor to the District of Columbia's child welfare programs operated under the <u>LaShawn A. v. Williams</u> Modified Final Order. As a result, CSSP performs a range of monitoring activities to assess the District's progress in meeting outcomes and benchmarks of progress, including special studies of aspects of the child welfare service delivery system. The <u>LaShawn</u> Modified Final Order and Implementation Plan require CFSA to operate a 24-hour system for receiving and responding to reports of child abuse and neglect, which conform to reasonable professional standards (MFO, Section II, A).

Over the past several months, CSSP has intensively reviewed the functioning of the Hotline for the purposes of assessing the effectiveness of the Hotline's policy, procedure and operations, with emphasis on the quality of the response provided by the Hotline and the adequacy of

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¹ Prior to October 1, 2001, reports related to child physical and sexual abuse were primarily taken by the Metropolitan Police Department's Youth Division or Sex Offense Branch and neglect calls were handled by CFSA. As part of the work to "end bifurcation" undertaken by the District of Columbia in 2000 and 2001, all aspects of the intake process for child abuse and neglect were unified as the responsibility of CFSA. The Metropolitan Police Department continues to collaborate with CFSA on investigation of child abuse but responsibility for the Hotline and for the initiation of timely completion of all investigations rests with CFSA.

staffing and support for the Hotline function. The overall goal of this review is to provide an objective assessment and to make recommendations to CFSA for ongoing improvement of the functioning of the District's child abuse and neglect Hotline. Simultaneous to the CSSP review, CFSA engaged a consultant as part of an internal review of both their Hotline and Investigations functions and has begun taking steps to improve performance. Ideally, this assessment and its recommendations will be useful to CFSA as they continue and accelerate their work.

II. METHODOLOGY

CSSP's assessment of the Hotline was conducted between August and October 2003 and included a combination of information gathering strategies:

- A review of CFSA written policy and procedure for the Hotline. These include previous and updated policies for the Hotline and for Investigative practice, a procedural manual compiled and provided by CFSA, and Hotline screens in FACES (the automated data system).
- A review of CFSA's monthly administrative data on the numbers of calls received by the Hotline and the number of those calls accepted for Investigation and Assessment.
- Direct observations by CSSP staff of the Hotline on three different occasions covering both day and evening shifts. The observers used a structured protocol which included listening to workers answering calls and documenting information gathering and follow-up procedures.
- Focus groups with Hotline workers and supervisors. Two separate focus groups were held with staff during the month of September.

Following completion of a draft report, CSSP staff met with CFSA in December 2003 to review preliminary findings and recommendations. CFSA provided supplementary information at that time about actions taken since October 2003 to improve the effectiveness of the Hotline. Pertinent additional information is included in the body of this report.

Appendix A includes a more in-depth explanation of the methodology for the assessment.

III. DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT HOTLINE FUNCTIONING

A. Unitary Telephone Number Accesses the Hotline Staff

Hotline staff are centrally located on the first floor of the Child and Family Service Agency's main building and are co-housed with the CFSA Intake and Investigation units. The telephone number for the Hotline (202/671-SAFE) rings on many phones in the Hotline Offices, with the capacity to roll over to eleven (11) extensions. Workers taking Hotline calls sit at a desk with computers which have dedicated FACES screens for recording information received from callers. The workers taking Hotline calls do not use headsets nor is there a system in place to tape record calls to the Hotline.

B. Qualification of Hotline Staff and Staffing Patterns

The general position title for staff at the Hotline is Hotline Worker. Most Hotline workers have either their Masters of Social Work (MSW) or Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degrees but this is not a requirement; Hotline workers are not licensed social workers and cannot carry a caseload. Supervisors of the Hotline, however, have an MSW and are licensed to practice social work. The daytime Hotline supervisor is responsible for a unit of Hotline workers only, but the after hours supervisors (evening and overnight shifts) are responsible for both the Hotline and Investigative staff which are grouped into teams. Generally, the workers assigned to the Hotline have several years of experience at the Agency. Several of the Hotline workers have previously worked in other areas of CFSA and, therefore, bring a broad based experience to this position.

Workers at the Hotline are assigned to one of three overlapping shifts with different staffing patterns for each shift. The shift hours are:

- 8:15 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. (day shift)
- 3:00 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. (afternoon/evening shift)
- 1:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. (overnight shift)

This staffing pattern is relatively new and was specifically designed to allow for the overlap of workers between 3:00 p.m. and 4:45 p.m., between 1:00 a.m. and 1:30 a.m., and between 8:15 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. Hotline workers are primarily responsible for answering all calls to the Hotline, however, supervisors are also available and sometimes "pitch in" if the volume of calls overextends the capacity of the full-time Hotline workers.

Fully staffed, there are supposed to be six full time employees for the first shift (8:15 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.). At the time of our on-site review, there were only four full time workers assigned to the first shift. Of those four, one worker was on extended leave from the Agency. The remaining two positions were not filled and thus the staffing for the first shift was in reality at 50 percent of

the planned staffing capacity. To augment staff capacity during the daytime shift, a contract employee was working a swing shift from 10:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Since the CSSP site visits, CFSA has moved to fill vacant positions and as of January 12, 2004, all six daytime positions were expected to be filled.

Fully staffed, there are supposed to be two full-time Hotline employees for each of the two combined Hotline/Investigations teams on the afternoon/evening shift (3:00 p.m. to 1:30 a.m.). These teams rotate four days on and three days off with one day of overlap. However, at the time of the CSSP review, each team had one Hotline position vacant leaving only one full time Hotline worker for each team on the second shift. To augment this lack of capacity, workers from the first and third shift frequently work overtime hours. As of the beginning of January 2004, CFSA reports that one of the vacancies was filled, leaving one Hotline worker and one supervisory vacancy in this time slot.

Staffing for the overnight shift (1:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.) includes one Hotline worker for each of two combined Hotline/Investigation teams, which work overnight. These teams also rotate four days on and three days off with one day of overlap. At the time of our review, these two Hotline positions were fully staffed with each staff person assigned to one of the third shift's combined Hotline/Investigation teams.

On weekends, the two shifts that span 3:00 p.m. until 11:30 a.m. are covered as described above, with the teams that rotate 4 days on and 3 days off. One Hotline worker covers the 8:15 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. shift on Saturdays and Sundays. Generally, the more experienced workers who wish to work overtime hours sign up in advance to take the available Saturday and Sunday hours.

Based on CSSP's observation and information from the Focus groups, the Hotline staffing pattern was not adequate during daytime hours to manage all of the calls coming into the Hotline. Several evening shift workers were used during the daytime hours to augment the staffing. Even with these workers doing "overtime," there did not appear to be a sufficient number of staff to adequately answer the phones at all times. The calls are being answered, but as one worker reported, the low staffing levels mean that workers spend less than adequate time on the phone gathering information from callers related to abuse and neglect. The worker believes that with additional staff, they would be able to stay on the line longer with callers and would be able to gather additional assessment data rather than only cursory information.

During CSSP's observations of workers on August 28 and 29, 2003, the average length of calls involving a full report of child maltreatment lasted approximately 17 minutes. Interestingly, one worker's perception was that she and other workers generally spend 5 - 7 minutes on each call. However, it is entirely possible that workers spent additional time on calls that were being observed by CSSP staff and that these averages do not reflect the usual practice at the Hotline or the pattern when there is a higher volume of calls. This information could be determined with

more accuracy if the phone system had the capacity to tape record calls for supervisory oversight.

C. On-Call Program

In 2003, CFSA developed an on-call program to assist families and foster parents who are known to the Agency that are experiencing a crisis during non-business hours. Families or foster parents have historically called the Hotline for assistance if their worker or the supervisor was not available for support. This new program was designed so that Hotline workers could contact workers from across the Agency. These on-call workers have signed up for after-hours availability to help stabilize families until the assigned case managing social workers are available. On-call workers respond either by phone or in person depending on the nature of the crisis.

When families or foster parents contact the Hotline for help, the information is first screened to ensure there are no new concerns of abuse or neglect. Callers reporting new concerns of abuse or neglect are managed through the Hotline and then referred to the Investigations workers as required by policy. Only in those instances where there are no new concerns of child maltreatment are the on-call workers contacted.

The Hotline workers are very optimistic about the usefulness of this program. They also stated, however, that program is still in the developmental stage and is not yet functioning optimally. Hotline workers stated that some on-call workers do not respond quickly enough and on occasion have not responded at all. These issues have also been acknowledged by the Agency and some modifications to address them were made since the CSSP review. Currently, responsibility for contacting on-call workers has been moved from the Hotline worker to the assigned on-call program administrator/manager. The Agency believes that this change will allow them to better assess and enforce timely response by on-call workers and will allow them to track the types of issues referred for on-call help.

D. Policies and Procedures

The policy for the Hotline, dated December 2002 states:

It is the policy of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) that all reports pertaining to child maltreatment are responded to in a thorough, systematic, and timely manner. To accomplish this goal, the Agency has established and maintains a Hotline system, which is operated and staffed on a 24-hour, 7-day per week basis. Staff assigned to the Hotline perform functions and duties in accordance with applicable legal requirements, CFSA policies and procedures, and training guidelines.

Written CFSA policy and procedure governing the Hotline covers the following areas:

- a. Roles and Responsibilities of Hotline Staff
- b. Reporting Child Maltreatment
- c. Nature of Report
- d. Gathering Information for Child Abuse or Neglect Reports
- e. Priority Criteria
- f. Institutional Abuse Reports
- g. Notification of Police
- h. Critical Event Reports
- i. Diplomatic Immunity Reports
- j. Military Reports

Additionally, the written policy includes as attachments legal definitions of child abuse and neglect, as well as guidance for workers on "child vulnerability factors" and the "caretaker/family and child danger factors."

Written policy for the Hotline has been evolving and improving over the past year. CFSA drafted new policy in June, 2003 and has recently made additional modifications in response to CSSP comments and other internal input on the draft. CFSA reports that final comments from CSSP on the approved Hotline policy are currently being incorporated² and that training for workers, supervisors and managers is planned for January 26 through February 11, 2004 on the approved policy.

E. Process for Managing Calls to the Hotline

Calls concerning allegations of child maltreatment come into the Hotline 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In addition to accepting calls related to reports of abuse and/or neglect, the Hotline also receives a variety of "Information and Referral" calls. These calls are mostly unrelated to child maltreatment and, in some cases, unrelated to any function of CFSA. For example, Information and Referral calls include calls from foster parents who need general or immediate assistance, inquiries for phone numbers for CFSA staff and other resources outside of CFSA, and "abscondance calls" notifying the Agency that a foster child has run away. The Hotline also receives calls from the public who have concerns about children and families, which are often legitimate concerns, but may not meet the legal definition of alleged child abuse or neglect.

One of the difficult jobs that the Hotline workers have to do is to courteously respond to all callers and intelligently probe for information so they can determine which calls are "Information and Referral" and which calls need to be accepted and investigated as child abuse

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² Under the requirements of the <u>LaShawn Modified Order</u>, the Court Monitor (CSSP) must review and approve policy in key areas, including the Hotline and Intake and Investigation policy.

and neglect. Further, they need to gather enough information to determine the seriousness of the situation so that the investigation staff know whether they have to respond <u>immediately</u> or within a 24-hour time period. Finally, for persons with requests for Information and Referral, the Hotline performs an invaluable community service by giving callers accurate and helpful information. Workers on the Hotline reported that they frequently feel overwhelmed by the volume of Information and Referral calls which divert their time and attention from their mandated legal responsibilities with respect to abuse and neglect.

To deal with the issue of managing both abuse and neglect and Information and Referral calls, during the first shift (8:15 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.), a hotline worker is assigned the "screener" function on a rotating basis throughout the shift. While acting as "screener," the worker answers all calls that come into the Hotline. During this time, the worker is removed from the pool of workers who are actually taking reports of child maltreatment to become the official screener. The screener is responsible for briefly assessing whether or not the call is related to child maltreatment by asking the caller, "How may I help you?" Those calls that are clearly related to child maltreatment are then transferred to an available worker who then takes a full report regarding the alleged abuse and/or neglect. The screener is responsible for simultaneously answering all calls to the Hotline while also getting enough information to triage the call. The volume of calls coming in sometimes results in a backlog.

Those calls that are screened as "Information and Referral" are managed in one of two ways. The screener handles those questions that can be answered quickly. For example, "Can you give me the telephone number for my on-going social worker?" or "Where do I go to access emergency utility funds?" Calls that are more complex and cannot be quickly answered, or if there are other calls waiting in the queue to be answered, are also referred to a Hotline worker.

The volume and type of calls received during a Hotline shift illustrates how difficult it is for one person to effectively screen all calls to determine if the calls should be referred to a Hotline worker, as well as to handle other information requests. During CSSP's observation of the daytime shift on August 28, 2003, the Hotline received 73 calls between 8:16 a.m. and 3:57 p.m. The average length of time between calls was 6.3 minutes – with some calls being received in the same minute as the previous call and some calls being received as much as 31 minutes apart. Of the 73 calls, only 12 calls were identified at initial screening as a "referral or report" related to child maltreatment and were forwarded to a Hotline worker. Thirty-eight (38) calls were identified as needing information related to CFSA (phone numbers for on-going workers, etc.) and 12 calls requested information not related to CFSA. Information calls related to CFSA were either handled by the screener or referred to a Hotline worker depending on the nature of the call.

On August 29, 2003, the Hotline received 57 calls between 9:09 a.m. and 3:52 p.m. The Hotline workers indicated this was a "slow" day because it was the Friday before a holiday weekend. The average length of time between calls was 6.8 minutes – again with some calls being received

in the same minute as the previous call and some calls being received as much as 47 minutes apart. Of the 57 calls, only 15 calls were identified at initial screening as a "referral or report" related to child maltreatment and were forwarded to a Hotline worker. Twenty-six (26) calls were identified as needing information related to CFSA and 8 of these calls were forwarded to a Hotline worker. The remaining 14 calls were requests for information unrelated to CFSA and were handled by the screener.

It is important to note that CFSA administrative data from FACES regarding Hotline calls provides a different picture of the number of Information and Referral Calls compared to Child Protective Services (CPS) calls than was observed by CSSP. Based on FACES data from the period between August 2002 and June 2003, between 23 and 36 percent of calls to the Hotline were identified as "Information and Referral." Conversely, between 77 and 64 percent of calls were allegations of abuse or neglect, requiring an investigation of child maltreatment. During CSSP observation on August 28, the balance was completely opposite with only 16 percent of calls being identified as alleged abuse or neglect. One explanation for this difference is that CSSP observed during our on-site visits that many of the Information and Referral calls were not entered into FACES. As a result, it is very likely that they are not captured in the CFSA administrative data. For example, on August 28 and 29, the Hotline received 73 and 57 calls, respectively. Administrative data for the month of August indicates that a total of 527 calls were received at the Hotline, which would be an average of 18 calls a day – far less than what was observed. It is important to underscore here that calls that were considered allegations of abuse or neglect are being entered into the system and responded to. It is the Information and Referral calls that are not consistently recorded.

An example of the difficulty created by having a single screener performing triage occurred during our observation on August 28. The Hotline screener was speaking to a woman in Houston, Texas who was concerned about her 16-year-old sister. During the call, the screener repeatedly (approximately 4-5 times) had to put the caller on hold to answer new incoming calls. The woman eventually hung up in frustration. Although she called back approximately 30 minutes later, it was clear that a single screener, even a skilled one, was unable to juggle both the screening and information gathering/provision functions.

During the afternoon and evening shifts, there is no separate screening function as the volume of calls is considerable lower. The Hotline workers answer all calls in rotation, depending on who is available. During our observation, this worked reasonably well, especially because when more than two calls come in at the same time, an investigations worker on the floor immediately picked up the third call.

F. Number and Types of Calls Received at the Hotline

Figure 1 below provides monthly data from the CFSA information system, FACES, on the number of calls received by the Hotline between September 1, 2002 and July 30, 2003. Both in the District and nationally, it is not unusual for the number of calls to a child abuse hotline to vary monthly. The average numbers of calls per month at CFSA's Hotline is 612, with a range from a high of 764 (August 2002) to a low of 491 (December 2002). As noted before, CFSA administrative data indicate that the vast majority of calls are reports of alleged abuse and neglect. We believe that the data on the number of abuse and neglect calls is accurate, but suspect that the number of Information and Referral calls entered into the database substantially undercounts the actual number of Information and Referral calls received.

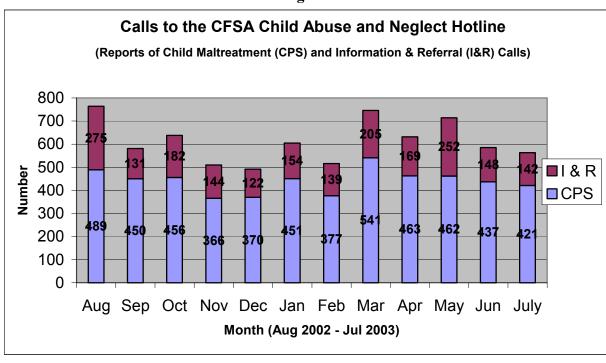


Figure 1

Source of Data: CFSA, FACES

Subsequent to a call being received at the Hotline and categorized as alleged abuse or neglect, some calls (between 2% - 9%) each month between August 2002 and July 2003, were screened out and deemed not appropriate for investigation. Conversely, between 91 percent and 98 percent of monthly calls were accepted for investigation during the same time period with an average of 95 percent of CPS calls being accepted for investigation. Typical calls that are screened out at the Hotline include the reports that need to be investigated by another jurisdiction (usually Maryland or Virginia) or calls that represent a duplicate report on a situation just received and

already in the investigative process. It is important to have a clearly defined oversight function in policy and practice that consistently reviews all screened out calls to make sure that all legitimate calls are investigated. CFSA reports that the Hotline supervisor reviews all screened-out calls for final approval and that program managers and supervisors in the after-hours shifts randomly review the Information and Referral calls, but CSSP did not see evidence of this during our review.

Figure 2 provides data on the disposition of Hotline calls based on monthly CFSA administrative data. It is important to note that the Agency has 30 days to complete an investigation, which means that not all calls referred to Investigations during a particular month will have a finding by the end of that month. For example, a case called into the Hotline on June 21 would not necessarily have an investigative finding until July 21. During the months from September 2002 to July 2003, between 27 percent and 38 percent of the cases that were closed each month in investigations were substantiated for abuse and/or neglect with an average of 32 percent of the cases being substantiated. This is consistent with national experience.

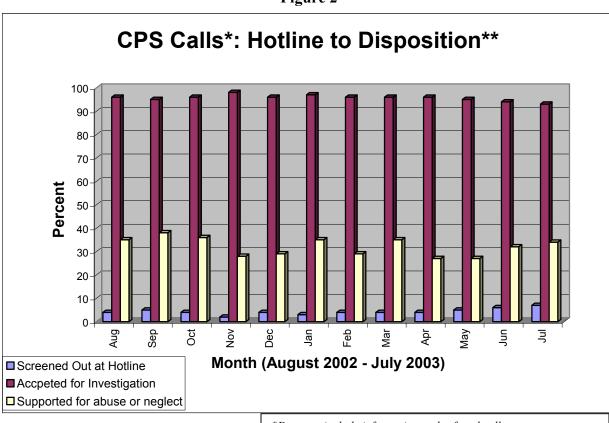


Figure 2

^{*}Does not include information and referral calls

^{**}Investigations are required to be completed within 30 days. All calls to the hotline during a particular month may or may not be completed by the end of that calendar month.

IV. ASSESSMENT OF WHAT IS WORKING WELL

> Improvement in Written Policy

Over the past six months, CFSA has revised written policy and procedure, with several areas of improvement, including:

- A description of the legal definitions abuse and neglect, incorporating recently passed
 District legislation (DC-2-22). The definitions seek to clarify for workers what
 constitutes alleged child abuse or neglect and what is information and referral. The
 policy also instructs workers how to handle cases of assault, institution abuse, and
 reports involving other jurisdictions.
- A description of mandated reporters and their responsibilities.
- A clear policy statement that CFSA workers are required to make reports to the Hotline when allegations of abuse and neglect arise in open cases at the Agency. Historically, this has been a source of considerable confusion at the Agency.
- Clear statements of how and when CFSA is to work with the Metropolitan Police Department.
- Criteria for assigning priority levels for investigation of reports.
- Inclusion of the child vulnerability and caretaker/family and child danger factors.

CFSA has also taken initial steps to move the policy to practice through training. Additional training for all staff is scheduled for late January and early February 2004.

> Transmitting Hotline Reports to the Intake Staff for Prompt Initiation of Investigation

The Hotline has developed multiple procedures for ensuring that calls accepted for investigation are properly transitioned to the Intake staff. The Hotline worker first calls the Intake supervisor to notify him/her that a case is being transferred to their unit and the FACES case number is provided. A hard copy of the FACES Hotline report is also printed out and hand carried by the worker or an administrative staff person to the office of the Intake Supervisor and a duplicate report is simultaneously sent through FACES to the supervisor. During our observation, for those cases requiring emergency attention, Hotline workers immediately consulted with the Supervisor and investigator to verbally share information about the case and provided handwritten notes

from the call. This attention to prompt transfer of information and initiation of investigations corrects problems that were prevalent several years ago when there were long time lags and frequent lapses in investigating reports of abuse and neglect.

> Supervisory Support

The supervisors observed at the Hotline were fully engaged in the work and supportive of the workers. On-site supervisory support at the Hotline is available to workers 24 hours, 7days a week. Supervisors were observed to be readily available to answer questions, provide direction, and generally "help out" whenever needed. During one of the CSSP observation times, the worker consulted with his/her supervisor on every Hotline call and consistently used the supervisor as part of the decision-making process. It is not clear, however, that this level of supervisory interaction is not uniformly available or sought by workers. Workers in the focus groups clearly requested more consistent supervision.

> Shift Overlap

The new staffing pattern which provides overlap between the morning shift and the evening shift is a positive improvement. It is intended to allow workers to share information about events from the morning shift that may be useful for the incoming shift. Given the overall staffing limitations, the overlap also increases the number of staff available to answer calls during a given time period. Hotline workers and supervisors indicated that this increase in workers, even for short periods, creates a more manageable workload, which allows workers to spend more time to gather information from callers and increases their ability to properly assess each allegation.

Positive Hotline Co-worker Relationships

It was clear in the focus groups that there is a positive camaraderie and teamwork among the workers. Workers indicated that they are able to depend on each other to problem solve and for support, and for specific help understanding policy and procedure. Without the support of their colleagues, especially veteran workers, the newer workers reported that they would not know how to effectively manage different kinds of Hotline calls. Workers also indicated they rely on their colleagues for information about available community resources for families and children which is an important component of the Information and Referral function. The importance and usefulness of these relationships was also evident to CSSP during the on-site observations of the Hotline. During the observation of the evening shift, a family of five children was brought to the Hotline Office by the Metropolitan Police who had responded to a call about children being left alone without heat, food and electricity. The CFSA staff and the Police Officers worked collaboratively to make the children as comfortable as possible and to carefully gather information from them. Other workers helped to locate food and begin planning to find an appropriate placement.

Professional Demeanor of Staff

During the observations, Hotline workers were courteous, empathic and maintained a professional demeanor with the callers. CSSP observers thought that callers were likely to experience the Hotline workers as caring and concerned about the children and families who are the subject of the reports.

Capacity to Check for Past History on Abuse and Neglect Allegations

The FACES data system automatically checks prior history for any calls entered into the system. This is a significant accomplishment and an important aid to Hotline and investigation workers in assessing allegations.

V. ASSESSMENT OF AREAS NEEDING IMPROVEMENT

Additional Work is Needed to Ensure that Policy and Procedural Guidance is Transmitted, Understood and Followed by Workers and Supervisors

While there have been policy and procedure improvements during the past year, it is clear that more needs to be done. CFSA has acknowledged this and has begun taking steps to more completely train workers and to reinforce training through supervisory and management practices. The observations below from the CSSP review as well as the feedback CFSA received from external consultant review should inform CFSA's continuing improvement strategies.

Hotline workers indicated during focus groups that managers have been unwilling to set clear procedures for managing different types of calls to the Hotline. Workers reported this management approach results in a lack of efficiency and accountability, worker confusion, and minimum confidence among workers when they accept reports. Despite written policy, Hotline workers are not clear about the criteria for what is an "accepted" or "unaccepted" call to the Hotline. Workers do not feel confident in their ability to determine if a call meets the criteria for acceptance and workers do not believe that there has been clear policy or consistency about this from the Agency. Despite written policy which references a Hotline screening tool, CSSP did not see any evidence of workers consistently using a "tool" to systematically assess allegations and make decisions about what to accept and how urgent a situation is. As a result, practice in the Hotline remains inconsistent. The lack of clarity may put some children at risk. At minimum, it creates friction between Hotline and Intake staff when investigation workers at times question decisions about whether or not a report should have been accepted. The lack of capacity to tape record calls and review them by supervisors and quality assurance managers makes it difficult to isolate the areas of policy and procedure confusion and provide training and support to address them.

Additionally, although there is now grater clarity about CFSA workers' responsibility to call the Hotline themselves regarding suspected abuse or neglect, some confusions remain. For example, during the CSSP observations, a call to a specific Hotline worker came from a CFSA program manager asking where, how and by whom a report of potential abuse to a child in foster care should be made. According to the Hotline worker, the program manager placed a call on the same case the week before. The foster mother had indicated to the social worker that the foster child often was withdrawn after returning from home visits. The foster mother was concerned that the child had reported sleeping without clothes on in the bed with others. At the end of the initial call, the Hotline worker asked the program manager to determine the jurisdiction of the concerns. In the interim, the Hotline worker discussed the case with the supervisor. The second call on August 28 was a full week after the initial call. In this call, the program manager indicated that the concerns related to the foster child were occurring in Maryland.

The Hotline worker stated to the program manager that a report would need to be made to the jurisdiction in Maryland and that he was unable to take a report on this case. Significant discussion then occurred regarding who was responsible for making the report to Maryland--with the options of the CFSA Hotline worker, the program manager, the social worker and the foster mother being debated. The Hotline worker stated that the program manager or the worker needed to make the report; the program manager thought that the foster mother should make the report. It was unclear at the end of the discussion what policy would govern and who would be making the report.

Despite the availability of written guidance, the Hotline staff reported that they do not have an organized procedural manual. Many of the documents provided to CSSP in manual format have been given to the Hotline staff in a piecemeal fashion and in some cases, not provided at all. At the time of the CSSP visit to the Hotline, many of the staff members were amazed to see the manual provided to CSSP and asked if they, too, could have one. In one instance, a Hotline worker took pages from the manual and copied them for herself.

Since CSSP's observations in the Fall, CFSA has taken steps to improve policy clarification and implementation. As mentioned before, training on the new policies is scheduled for mid-January to early February and Supervisors and Program Managers will be responsible for reinforcing policy compliance in practice. A new Policy and Procedures Manual is expected to be developed prior to the training and distributed to all staff.

Role of the Hotline: "Information and Referral" Calls and the "Screening" Process

While the primary function of the Hotline is to accept reports of alleged child abuse and neglect, it has an important secondary function of providing information and referral. Numerous "Information and Referral" calls are received by the Hotline, many related to other functions of CFSA and some reflecting the community's needs for assistance. The time needed to properly respond to "information and referral" calls must be factored into CFSA's staffing allocation decisions and there must be a sufficient number of staff at all times to adequately perform both functions.

To accommodate the volume of Information and Referral calls, the daytime shift has developed a "screening" process previously described, which does not appear to be an entirely effective solution. The volume of calls creates an impossible job for the screener and can result in inadequate service delivery to both those callers with actual allegations of maltreatment and those requesting other kinds of help.

An updated phone system is planned for the Hotline that would eliminate the separate screener function by automatically rotating calls among all of the workers. It is not clear to CSSP that this system will completely alleviate the problems described above if there continues to be the

current volume of calls, coupled with an inadequate staffing level. Without sufficient staff, it is possible that an automated phone system could allow calls related to abuse and neglect to be sent to voicemail if all of the automated phone lines are tied up. All acknowledge that this would be unacceptable practice.

> Staffing

Based on the staffing level at the time of the CSSP review, we concluded that the level of staffing for the Hotline was insufficient and contributed to numerous difficulties in the day-to-day operations. These difficulties included the inability to thoroughly screen and assess all calls consistently, and the overuse of placing callers on hold. Hotline staff reported a general feeling of being overwhelmed.

The understaffing also resulted in workers not availing themselves of training opportunities because they are aware of the hardship it would cause for their colleagues who remain on the Hotline during the training session. Additionally, workers stated that they are often unable to take adequate breaks. The lunch hour is also difficult because the available staff is decreased even more during this period.

While CFSA has provided evidence of improvement in staffing since the Monitor's on-site review, staffing may still not be sufficient. CSSP recommends that all existing vacancies be filled immediately and remain filled, and that an additional review of Hotline staffing (in order to determine whether the staff needs further augmentation) occur once all currently allocated positions are filled and after the policy and procedure training occurs.

Staff Morale

All three focus groups identified morale among Hotline staff as low, although this was not obvious to CSSP staff during our observations. While several workers indicated during the focus groups that they do receive supervisory support and CSSP was able to observe this support during the direct observations, many other workers stated they receive limited supports from their supervisors and managers. Workers indicated that other staff at CFSA perceive them as "glorified receptionists" within the Agency. In addition to minimum levels of perceived support, workers feel there is little room for advancement, decreasing the incentive for a worker to continue his/her job.

> Training

Hotline workers in both focus groups expressed enthusiasm about some training they had just received and an eagerness to receive additional training. Workers reported the need for training on both sexual and physical abuse, determining when to accept reports (i.e., policy

implementation), and refresher training on crisis intervention. Workers indicated that CFSA has provided some training opportunities and a recent training that was tailored for Intake and the Hotline got good reviews from the workers. However, workers indicated that these training opportunities were not always convenient or accessible because of the lack of adequate staffing at the Hotline. To address this need, CFSA intends to provide additional training to all Hotline staff and supervisors in late January and early February and has been designing the training in a way to insure that it is reinforced through supervisory and management follow-up.

> Data Entry and Documentation

Workers are required to enter the information from their telephone calls directly into FACES, the Agency's automated data system. Currently, the workers jot down notes on pieces of paper during the phone calls and then, after the call is over, enter data into FACES. While workers are generally following a checklist of items to cover during the call, the amount and quality of information documented as a result of this practice varies.

Hotline workers report that they use this two-step process because FACES screens are not user-friendly for the Hotline function, but rather were designed to assist the Intake function at CFSA. Workers indicated that a redesign of the FACES screens with an address and demographic page (like the one currently in FACES) plus a one-page assessment form with prompts (allegation, medical, education, substance abuse, community support, etc.) would be more likely to result in comprehensive data being entered into FACES. This may be especially true of "information calls" as several workers did not enter any information related to these calls into FACES during the observation. In at least one instance, the data from a complex information and referral call should have been entered into FACES as a record of the conversation and it was not.

It is also important to note that the quality of the narrative about allegations that is entered into FACES is relatively substandard. Because workers are pressed for time, the narratives are short and frequently do not provide key information about the child and family. The Hotline is the "front door" to the Agency and the documentation that is created there sets the tone for all other workers at CFSA. A higher standard is needed on the front end as a primary strategy for improving documentation throughout the Agency.

CFSA reports that they are taking steps to address the identified data entry and documentation issues. A decision has been made to replace the existing Hotline Screening Tool with an updated tool developed by Child Welfare Institute (CWI). This tool, which is in the final stages of development, will be on-line in FACES by March 31, 2004. Prior to this implementation, Hotline workers will be trained on how to use the new screening tool manually. CWI also

provided recommendations to modify the Safety Assessment for Intake and Investigations screens. A CFSA FACES design workgroup has begun to design the FACES screens based on the CWI recommendations. The anticipated completion date for the FACES build and training is March 31, 2004.

> Non-English Language Capacity

The Hotline has inadequate resources to accept calls from non-English speakers. A Spanish speaking caller to the Hotline hung up after being placed on hold a number of times while waiting for the Hotline worker to access an interpreter. During the time the caller was on hold, the Hotline worker consulted with other workers in the Hotline about how to best access an interpreter. There were several suggestions made (get help from a Collaborative, use a webbased interpreter service, contact the 4th District MPD), but a clear protocol for accessing and utilizing interpreters did not seem to exist nor were there any identified resources within CFSA for interpreter services. CFSA reports that they have been recruiting to find bilingual staff for the Hotline but have not had success. They are considering a contract with an agency for this language capacity and are working to develop a clear protocol of what a worker should do when there is a language barrier. This issue needs quick resolution.

Checking for Past History on All Information and Referral Calls

CFSA's automated data system, FACES, automatically checks for prior reports of abuse and neglect when the worker is entering data about a call. This is an automatic function of FACES and occurs for both abuse and neglect reports and those Information and Referral reports that are entered into the system. However, for Information and Referrals calls not entered into FACES and those other calls that are determined not to meet the criteria for an investigation and are not entered into FACES, there is no check to determine if the family has previously been reported to the Hotline. It is important to enter all of the calls into FACES so that checks on prior history can be done for any call that is not routine Information and Referral (i.e., asking for a social worker's telephone number).

Quality Assurance

There is no systematic or consistent process for supervisors to assess worker decisions about calls that are screened out by the Hotline, particularly for calls when information is not entered into FACES. In many cases, the worker consults with the supervisor on whether or not to accept a report that may ultimately be screened out. However, it was not clear to the CSSP observers, that <u>every</u> screened out call gets a thorough review by a supervisor. Further, without capacity to tape record and review conversations, there is no systematic way to review the quality of the assessment and information gathering skills of Hotline workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

> Staffing

The Hotline is specifically designed to take reports of child abuse and neglect. In order to effectively do this, workers must be able to spend the time necessary with each caller to thoroughly assess the situation and gather the needed information. In addition to taking reports of abuse and neglect, the Hotline also serves as a source for "Information and Referral" for the Agency and community. At the time of the CSSP review, there was insufficient staff to adequately perform both functions.

CSSP recommends that the number of staff for all shifts be increased. The current staffing level was inadequate in both the first and second shifts to effectively manage the Hotline. Since the review, there has been progress on filling vacancies. It is CSSP's opinion, however, that even if there were no vacancies, there still may not be sufficient staff available to manage the Hotline. We recommend first, that all existing vacancies be immediately filled and second, that there be a reassessment of Hotline staffing by the end of March 2004. This would be after intensive training has occurred and some technological improvements are in place, both of which may improve efficiency of current staff.

> Screening Process

A full review of how calls are screened in the Hotline should occur after the new telephone system is in place. The current screening process is ineffectual and results in callers hanging up, being placed on hold repeatedly and being sent to voicemail. A new phone system that is expected to be installed is designed to address this problem but we would caution the Agency to thoroughly assess its effectiveness before committing to it as the sole solution to screening calls.

Policy and Procedure Dissemination and Training

Each worker needs a complete and comprehensive policy and procedure manual. The Agency has committed to providing this by the end of January. Additional training opportunities that are tailored to meet the needs of the Hotline staff should also be developed and provided. These should include training on the indicators of physical and sexual abuse, crisis intervention, consistent implementation of the new policies and procedures, quality documentation, and strategies to reduce burnout. Training should be made widely available to the Hotline so that everyone has the opportunity to attend. This would include developing innovative staffing patterns that would allow for additional staff members or contractors to be called upon to staff the Hotline while training is occurring. CFSA has recognized the need for additional training and has scheduled training on policy and procedure for January and February 2004.

Language Capacity

Interpreters are needed to assist non-English speaking callers to the Hotline. Interpreters should be readily available and all Hotline workers should know how to access this resource quickly.

> Technical Supports and Additional Resources

Additional technical supports are needed to assist Hotline workers, including an updated phone system that is carefully matched to the needs of the Hotline. Importantly, any new phone system should have the capacity to record all calls to the Hotline for quality assurance purposes. CFSA agrees with this recommendation and has acknowledged that efforts that date to March 2001 to provide this technology have been unsuccessful and need to be restarted and accelerated. CFSA reports that they are currently reviewing bids for a new phone system with capacity for data recording and retrieval.

Phone headsets coupled with changes in FACES are also needed to allow workers to enter data directly into FACES while they are talking with callers. This would include closely matching the screens in FACES to the data that should be gathered on every call. As a result, workers would (1) have a "tool" in FACES to enter information that assists them in determining if a report should or should not be accepted, the level of risk, and the need for immediate response and (2) have screens that prompt them to enter all the assessment and demographic data that are required in the Hotline procedures. This would ensure that the "best practice" of the Hotline drives what is in FACES rather that the screens in FACES facilitate what information is collected by the Hotline workers

Documentation and Quality Assurance

All calls – both Information and Referral and CPS - that come into the Hotline should be directly and immediately entered into FACES. Additionally, the quality of documentation that originates in the Hotline should be improved. This is the entry point for all children and families into the Agency. If the quality of documentation is poor at the onset, it is likely to remain that way. The Agency has a clear opportunity to train a small group of workers in how to develop high quality documentation that can then set a higher bar for other workers throughout the Agency.

Currently, quality assurance in the Hotline depends primarily on what workers document about the calls they take. Expanded opportunities for quality assurance should be developed to include 1) supervisory observation of workers while they are taking calls; 2) daily supervisory review of logs and phone records of all screened out calls; 3) periodic quality assurance review of a sample of taped calls to assess quality; and 4) contacting reporters to assess their satisfaction with the services of the Hotline.

Appendix A Methodology for Each Data Collection Element

Review of Policies, Procedures and Staffing

The Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) updated its policies and procedures for the Hotline in September 2003. The new policies are part of a broad effort to revise many of the Agency's policies as it continues to implement overall agency reforms. CSSP reviewed the Hotline draft policies and provided comments and recommendations to the Agency in August 2003. These recommendations were incorporated into the current Hotline policy dated September 30, 2003.

CFSA also provided a Hotline Administrative Manual to CSSP for the purposes of this review. Contents included an organizational chart of the Hotline, staff credentials, the position description for Hotline workers and supervisors, staffing schedule, the Hotline screens in FACES, and training materials used with mandated reporters. The Hotline Program Manager was also interviewed as part of this review.

Data Analysis

Administrative data regarding the practices in the Hotline are provided to CSSP on a monthly basis. The data is obtained by the Agency from their automated data system – FACES. CSSP regularly reviews and compiles the data for analysis.

Observation of the Hotline

On four separate days, staff from CSSP conducted direct observations of Hotline workers accepting calls from the community. These observations occurred during business hours on three weekdays in August and one evening observation occurred in October 2003. During the daytime observations, one CSSP reviewer was at the Hotline while two reviewers were at the Hotline during the evening observation. Reviewers listened to the responses of the Hotline workers as they were taking calls and then debriefed after the call with the worker regarding the full content of the allegations or questions. A standardized instrument was used by the reviewers to collect information about each call that was observed. This information was compiled and analyzed by CSSP as part of the development of this report.

Focus Groups

On September 11, 2003, three focus groups were held with the staff of the Hotline. One focus group was held with Hotline supervisors and two focus groups were held with Hotline workers. All supervisors and workers were informed that the information they provided would be shared with CFSA and included in a public document. A predetermined set of questions listed below was developed for the focus groups and shared with the Agency prior to the meetings.

Focus Group Questions:

- □ Names of participants
- □ Length of tenure at CFSA in general and length of tenure at the Hotline
- □ Role at the Hotline
- □ What training was provided to prepare them for their positions?
- □ What do they like about working at the hotline? What works well about the Hotline?
- □ What is the decision-making process for determining whether or not to accept a report for investigation? Are there screening tools? Who is involved in the decision-making?
- □ How are calls from non-English speaking individuals handled?
- □ Are calls from mandated reports handled differently from other calls? What about anonymous calls?
- □ When and how are callers told if their report is being accepted or not?
- □ How are Information and Referral calls handled?
- □ How are priorities (Level I or II) assigned to accepted calls?
- □ How are emergencies handled?
- □ Who checks for prior reports in FACES?
- □ When is information from a call entered into FACES? Who enters this information?
- □ How is the information from an accepted Hotline call transferred to Intake workers?
- □ What is the quality assurance process? Does anyone review your work and provide feedback about the quality?
- □ How does the new on-call program working?
- □ What other practice changes have there been in the past year at the Hotline?
- □ Are there other changes you would like to see in the future at the Hotline?